

Illness as a Conversation

Author August Gold Delivers Weekly Inspiration

by AUGUST GOLD

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The Buddhist that said everyone in life experiences 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows probably never had cancer. One bout of cancer has got to be the equivalent of at least 1,000 sorrows, if you ask the woman who at 40 was struck with it. When the doctor gave her the news, Caroline felt like Life was punishing her. She was a good person; why would life lay such a heavy burden on her? On any of us?

The Tao Te Ching, a 3,500-year-old Taoist sacred text, says something extraordinary about Life: "Without fail, She brings us to our own perfection." It means that this dynamic field of energetic pure possibility that we call Life is, without exception, bringing us the very experience we need to have. The Greek root of the word "perfection" means wholeness, and Life is ever impelling us to grow into our wholeness because in nature that which does not grow dies. The same is true for human nature. Even the Talmud tells us that Life is growth when it says that there is an angel sitting above each blade of grass whispering, "Grow, grow." If this is true, then cancer isn't just an illness, it's a conversation. Cancer is a conversation that Life is having with us personally, in order to grow us into our greatness. It is the burden that grows us into our greater selves to live our greater lives.

In the beginning of time, the old fable goes, birds did not have wings. One day, however, Life decided to create wings for the birds. Life laid the wings down in front of the birds and said, "Lift up your burden and carry it." The birds thought to themselves, "Why in the world would we want to pick up this burden when we already have so many others in our constant struggle to survive?" But eventually the birds relented and did as they were told: They each lifted up their burden and carried it. Each day they carried the burden on their shoulders a little farther and they complained a little less, until the time came when the wings attached to their shoulders. One day a wild north wind blew through their valley. The birds were worrying about the strength of the wind versus the frailty of their bodies when unexpectedly a strong wind lifted them up off their feet. Instantly their wings extended and they went soaring through the sky. That is when the birds understood that their weight was their wings.

Illness is a conversation that Life is having with us. Sometimes it's the only way for Life to get our attention and it works like a charm. When illness comes, it is wise to enter the conversation because it is the only way for us to see with our own eyes how what is happening to us is really happening for us.

When I met Caroline many years ago in my office, I explained that entering the conversation with Life was not a luxury, but a necessity. Life is not going to learn our language -- we are going to have to learn its language. I gave her a pen and some paper and told her to write an honest letter to her cancer. Twenty minutes later she signed the letter, at which point I handed her a fresh sheet of paper and said, "Now invite your cancer to write back to you." She raised an eyebrow at the weird suggestion. Really, there is nothing weird about entering a conversation that Life is always having with us; a conversation that doesn't stop just because we haven't been listening. Caroline asked her cancer to write her a letter, and when she put the pen to paper she drew a picture instead. It was a picture of praying hands that she recognized as the ones she'd sculpted out of clay when she was 10 years old. Then she wrote, and wrote, and wrote.

She read the letter aloud, she said, because she wanted me to hear the "loving" letter from her cancer. It reminded her how much she used to love working with clay, how deeply her heart missed loving something that much, and how she hadn't felt that kind of joy in her life ever since. Caroline was flooded with all the

joyousness of that 10-year-old girl with her hands in clay.

The deeper conversation that Life was having with Caroline concerned this joyousness that she'd left behind in her youth. The conversation with her cancer revealed that, without this inner joyousness, Caroline's inner life had grown parched and stale. She was surviving, not thriving. While we may resign ourselves to simply existing in the world, our soul never will. And that is why over time the conversation gets louder.

The next year, having reconnected with her joyful nature, Caroline quit the job that had brought her everything but joy, and took a job in environmental law. Next to her great love of clay, Caroline loved the earth. She left her career to start her destiny and never looked back. The "weight of her illness" had become her wings.

"Without fail," the Tao insists, "She brings you to your own perfection." Our burden is brought to us personally: it is neither an accident nor a punishment. It carries a message of deep growth for us individually. However, our burden becomes our wings only when we pick up the burden and carry it; and accept it. It is only by accepting the burden that we carry (instead of fearing it, hating it or blaming it) that we go deeper within ourselves and find the treasure we did not know was buried there.

All these years we've been looking in the wrong place for our life purpose, or destiny or true love. The Tao has been telling us for thousands of years, "Within, within this is where the world's treasure has always been." When illness comes, it often scares us enough that we're willing to do anything -- even go deeper. For when we do we will absolutely find our treasure: the treasure of our deeper self, without which we have been unable, despite our best efforts, to fly. This is the deeper story of our life -- the story of our greatness.

The Torah tells the tale of Jacob, who like Caroline, was compelled to enter the conversation with Life. It is the night before Jacob was about to reunite with his brother Esau. Jacob had reason to be fearful about this meeting because years before he had stolen his brother Esau's birthright, an inheritance worth a great deal. In the darkness of night, an angel came to Jacob and began wrestling with him. All night Jacob wrestled with the angel. When morning came the angel told Jacob to let him go, and he refused. "I will not let you go until you bless me." After an eight-hour wrestling match, which painfully dislocated his thigh bone, Jacob would not let go until he received the blessing from this strange angel. Finally, the angel agreed and gave Jacob the blessing of a new name, a more expansive name: Israel, meaning "he who struggled with the angel and survived." His new name was indicative of the greater wholeness that Jacob had attained. Like Jacob, we must enter the conversation to retrieve our blessing in order to be grown by Life.

D.H. Lawrence, in his poem "The Song of a Man Who Has Come Through," offers similar counsel. "What is the knocking at the door in the night? It's somebody wants to do us harm. No, no, it is the three strange angels. Admit them, admit them." Illness is a strange angel, indeed, but it comes with a blessing that is the very inner treasure you have been unknowingly seeking all your life.

While there are many who'd claim that finding our destiny or living our purpose is a bit of spiritual foolishness, our soul knows better. Life knows better. The truth is that in our wholeness we become who we were born to become: a source of life for others, and a source of life for the world.